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## 2<sup>nd</sup> Cyprus International Conference on Educational Research, (CY-ICER 2013) Second Language Learning and Teaching in Iran

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### Abstract

*"We know that teachers come to teacher training with ideas about the teaching/learning process formed from the years they have spent as students themselves<sup>1</sup>."*

The purpose of this article is to provide a contemporary portrait of Language Learning and Teaching, and transparently to study the second language learning and teaching in Iran. In fact the paper is to identify major trends and issues and to show where second language learning and teaching methods and techniques have come from and to illustrate ways teachers can incorporate the different techniques of various methods in their own teaching practices. As a method of study; the essay is a personal account, tracing the author and his colleagues' struggles with theoretical and conceptual issues and illustrating practical solutions. It is composed of some facts covering the conceptual and empirical basis for second language learning and teaching. The findings which are concluded from practical classes of those teachers who wish develop the materials and pedagogical procedures, focusing on the specified methods and their relatively techniques which are appropriate for Persian speakers who are learning second language. At last the article recommends the second language teachers to instruct a combination of different techniques which are appropriate for Persian speakers who wish to learn second language in a better way respectively.

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**Key Words:** learning, teaching, second language, GTM, ALM;

### Introduction

Language acquisition is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language, as well as to produce and use words and sentences to communicate. It usually refers to first-language acquisition and is distinguished from second-language acquisition, which deals with the acquisition of additional languages by both children and adults. Second-language acquisition (often abbreviated to SLA) is the process by which people learn a second language; it also refers to the scientific discipline devoted to studying that process. Second language refers to any language learned in addition to a person's first language; although the concept is named second-language acquisition, it can also incorporate the learning of third, fourth, or subsequent languages. <sup>(2)</sup> In the previous decade, critical approach to SLA has established itself as an academic field, with an abundance of empirical studies applying SLA principles and methods in classes and second language curricula at language academies. Noticeably absent from the contexts of implementation are courses in understanding the appropriate method for a specified region or community. While the term second language covers broad interpretations, this paper looks closely at values methods of second language teaching uphold related to SLA in the context of an individual community for instance Persian speakers. Implementation of an individual method or particular techniques is not a matter of teacher compliance rather the teacher should be encouraged to develop a sense of understanding and to exploit her/his professional knowledge within the mandate of the context of the main language of the particular community. It is well known that in modern life, becoming bilingual is a way of life, in fact the whole character is affected as a learner struggles to reach another world beyond the confines of her/his first language and approach into a new language and a new way of thinking. SLA is not a set of easy steps that can be programmed in a quick do-it-yourself kit. The teaching

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process of the second language is the facilitation of learning, in which a teacher can "teach" a foreign language successfully if, among different other things, the teacher understands the lingua background of the community as the logical path of second language acquiring. Can second language teachers effectively teach a language if they do not know anything about the relationship between language and culture, sociolinguistics, and first language acquisition, just to name a few concepts at random? The TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) organization, in its *Guidelines for the Certification and Preparation of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages in the United States*, cites the necessity for the TESOL teacher to "understand the nature of language, the fact of language varieties - social, regional, and functional, the structure and development of the English language system". But where does a second language teacher begins the quest for an entire understanding of the principles of SLA to perceive how does learning take place? Thomas Kuhn (1970) referred to "normal science" as a process of puzzle solving in which part of the task of the scientist is to discover the pieces, and then to fit the pieces together. Although many of the pieces of the second language acquiring puzzle are not yet discovered, but in this case the second language teacher as the scientist is to discover the pieces, and then to fit the pieces together by carefully defining the above mentioned question which lead her/him to find those pieces.

### Context

I assume, by patrolling some WH questions which probe the nature of the subject matter of the SLA we can approach towards the accurate solution to the problem:

What is language, what is learning, what is teaching and how do they interact?

Who does teach the second language?

Why are learners attempting to acquire the specified second language?

To ignite an inkling of the diversity of the according issues involved in the quest for better understanding of the principles of SLA, these questions are designed in a very global terms. And while hoping for any conclusion to find final answers to entire questions seems cul-de-sac, there is hope of achieving some tentative answers.

What is language? To presume to define language adequately would be fanciful, but consider the following definitions of language found in dictionaries and thesauruses:

- Language is a system of communication by sound, operating through the organs of speech and hearing, among members of a given community, and using vocal symbols possessing arbitrary conventional meanings (Pei 1966:141)
- Language is any set or symbols of linguistic symbols as used in a more or less uniform fashion by a number of people who are thus enabled to communicate intelligibly with one another (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language* 1966:806)
- Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication (Wardhaugh 1972:3)
- [Language is] a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* 1961:1270)

Many of the noteworthy characteristics of language are encapsulated in the mentioned enormous definitions. A consolidation of the given definitions concedes that language operates in a speech community generatively.

But what is *learning* and what is *teaching* and how do they interact? A search reveals that learning is "getting knowledge of a subject by study, experience, or instruction." A more specialized definition might read: "Learning is relatively permanent change in behavioural tendency and is the result of reinforced practice" (Kimble and Garnezy 1963:133). Teaching may be defined as "showing or helping someone to learn how to do something, giving instructions, guiding in the study of something." What matters is that teaching cannot be defined apart from learning. Nathan Gage (1964:269) noted that "to satisfy the practical demands of education, theories of learning must be 'stood on their head' so as to yield theories of teaching." In fact teaching is guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn.<sup>3</sup>

Who does the teaching of the second language? As it is explained teaching facilitates learning, and teacher is the one who enables the learner to learn, by setting the conditions for learning. If, a language teacher as B.F. Skinner describes, looks at learning as a process of operant conditioning through a carefully paced program of reinforcement, the language teacher will teach accordingly. If the teacher views second language learning basically

as a deductive rather than an inductive process, she/he will probably to choose present copious rules and paradigms to her/his students rather than let them "discover" those rules inductively.

Researchers (Fullan, & Miles, 1992<sup>4</sup>; Fullan, 2001<sup>5</sup>; Brown, 2000<sup>6</sup>; Ellis, 2003<sup>7</sup>; Dong, 2004<sup>8</sup>; Spaulding, Carolino, & Amen, 2004<sup>9</sup>) suggest teacher beliefs and values as having profound influence on classroom practice and teaching decisions. Further, research has also shown that different people owing to the different interpretations they ascribe to curriculum implementation carry out curriculum processes and tasks differently. Long ago, Breen (1991)<sup>10</sup> proposed that curriculum change can be brought about through teacher reflection, particularly, by encouraging teachers to make connections between classroom action and personal theory.

Finally why, as the most encompassing of all questions: Why are learners attempting to acquire the specified second language? Are the second language learners attempting to acquire the second language within the cultural and linguistic milieu of the second language - that is, in a "second" language situation in the technical sense of the term where the acquaintance of the second language culture helps the learner to fully understand and feel the second language? Obviously not, as a matter of the fact, English Language is students' non-optional second language in my country's pedagogical system, as the system did not improve towards an optional procedure; its rigid teaching method shows no progress accordingly. However, there are serious considerations as to the best methods, here briefly review two popular methods and discuss some personal experiences which start based on the Grammar-Translation Method (*GMethod*) in high school, and continue with Audio-Lingual Method (*ALMethod*) in Private Sector. I try to offer an account of the main issues the learner would face with in the process of learning, and where applicable, struggle to examine the issues and trace them back to the techniques and approaches employed by the instructors. I strive to evaluate them based on generally accepted standards and to elaborate them on the impact they have had on my current approach to learning and teaching.

When I started learning English I was a student at high school, the class was a teacher-centred one. Our teacher had a traditional role of speaking, explaining or writing on the blackboard and we had to listen without taking part actively in the learning process. For instance, to teach grammatical points, he used to explain grammatical usage in Persian, and then gave us some examples on the blackboard and asked us to write them down in our notebook. The evaluation system was based on memorizing the list of irregular verbs usually found at the end of our books, examples of how to change the verbs into question and negative forms were given by him and we used to copy the procedure. To teach new words, the teacher normally asked us to repeat the words and write down their meanings in Persian without contextualization, memorizing vocabulary including antonyms and synonyms had a very important role, and the logic was that memorizing vocabulary would provide good mental exercise. To read a passage, word by word translation was compulsory, sometimes we had to be prepared to translate the whole passage and know the meaning of the words by heart, if we could translate, we were considered a successful learner! The easiest words for us were those equivalents which had some etymological relations of Indo-European origins of Persian and English languages, tranquil memorizing words such as brother, mother and so on (*Persian: Baradar, Madar*) had hilarity enjoyment effect on our little souls, sometimes our teacher also used to facilitate his teaching process through attention to the similarities.

Regarding inquiry, we were shy to ask questions, if a question was asked, teacher might instruct one of inquirer's friends to respond appropriately, if the answer was incorrect, he was the one to select another student to supply the correct answer, there were times when the teacher himself used to give the answer.

Generally in the *GMethod* there was a very minor attention to speaking and almost none to pronunciation, although we were forced to learn grammar rules but never had chance to test those rules. Clearly I believe *GMethod* has definite drawbacks, and since we as students didn't contextualize the words, we couldn't use them in real-life situations, after graduation from high school we couldn't produce even simple sentences.

When high school finished, those who intended to continue learning English, started from another zero point and approached to Private Sector, which teaches English with different techniques and principles, mainly Audio-Lingual Method (*ALMethod*). When I entered my first private English class, the first thing I noticed was that the students were attentively listening as the teacher was presenting a conversation between two people, and even if some students could not understand her completely, she used actions to convey what she meant, but she didn't utter even one Persian word, sometimes the students got her point out of the pantomimes.

The case was that she only used English, and whenever she couldn't manage to inculcate parts of a text, she used actions, pictures and realia to empathy meaning otherwise. As native and target languages had separate linguistic structures, always she was trying to keep them apart to minimize Persian interferences. The other technique she used was to introduce language drills by modelling the correct answers; at other times, she corrected our mispronunciation by modelling the proper sounds. She had major roles in being a good model of English speaker,

and by listening to how it is supposed to sound; the students were able to mimic her. And to form habits the students were encouraged to repeat patterns of communicative usages and lines of dialogues, whenever errors occurred, she used to correct them immediately. To enable the students respond to both verbal and nonverbal stimuli, she used spoken and image cues, and to overcome the habits of Persian language interferences, she used to do a contrastive analysis between English and Persian languages in order to locate the places where she anticipated the students had trouble.

### Conclusion

As a result, I reckon as a learner and a teacher who had different teachers with various traits and teaching methodologies, to adhere to a single approach is not practical for Persian speakers. There are still language teachers who are used to rote-teaching and old methods, while others are supportive towards errors and try to motivate their students and use modern approaches and focus on making learners independent and encourage them to learn and use English in a more natural way. Generally I believe different methods suit different communities with different cultures and backgrounds. One should not revolve around a single method. It was noticed that in the *ALMethod*, our speaking practice consisted of producing phonologically and grammatically corrects sentences, and according to that approach we were expected to drill the repeated patterns of the English language item, certainly dialogue memorizing is hard for students and preparing drills for teachers are blind spots of this method. However, there are serious questions as to the best methods of gathering and analysing the very data upon which such descriptions must rest, as the subject of teaching is 'human', therefore a combination of methods may possibly help Persian speaking learners to cope with their needs.

As Donald Freeman states: "A knowledge of methods is part of the knowledge base of teaching. With it, teachers join a community of practice"<sup>11</sup>."

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